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Inaugural Lecture

on

The Study of History

DELIVERED ON WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 7, 1906

BY

CHARLES OMAN, M.A.

CHICHELE PROFESSOR OF MODERN HISTORY

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INAUGURAL LECTURE ON THE STUDY OF HISTORY

It was with a feeling of deep discouragement that I realized on December 18 last, that I was expected within six or seven weeks to face my colleagues of the Modern History School, and the whole University, with an Inaugural Lecture. Such an address ought to be a sort of profession of faith, a solemn setting forth of the views which the newly-appointed professor holds, and the programme which he intends to carry out, so far as in him lies, during his tenure of his chair. I have heard many inaugural lectures; most of them were interesting, some were pronouncements of much importance and high literary merit. And now I have to come before you, not like so many of my predecessors with all the prestige of a reputation gained outside Oxford, not with the glamour of the unknown about me, but simply as a veteran college tutor with twenty-one years of essays and lectures behind me, to say what I must say. How can such a work-a-day being, known personally to almost every one here present, the most simple and comprehensible of phenomena, hope to deliver to you any message that you do not already know by heart? All that I can set forth is the impression which twenty-one years of practical teaching, interspersed with such research as my leisure would allow, has left upon my mind. I have no dreams of revolutionizing the University; I have no 'divine dis-

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content' about me. I have always loved my work, and I think that our present history curriculum, despite certain faults, is on the whole a very admirable compromise between the practical and the ideal. If you expect me to advocate the abolition of our examinations and classes, or the substitution of some systems of *seminars* for the tutor's weekly essay, or the conversion of our Modern History School into a technical machine for training historians, I fear that you will be disappointed. Perhaps my thrice seven years in harness have stereotyped my views and made me short-sighted in my outlook on history at large ; perhaps—and this I naturally prefer to believe myself, for man is a hopeful if a fallible being—they have given me some practical lessons, which not every history professor has had the chance of learning. It is for you to judge. I can but give my humble opinion for what it is worth, on what I think that history is, and how I think it can best be taught. The theme, you may say, is trite—we have heard and read far too much about it already. Can I say anything that has not been put in a much better shape by some earlier venter of such harangues? Remember the wisdom of Bishop Stubbs's Inaugural of 1868, the passion of Freeman's declamation, the literary polish that Froude put into his half-ironical apology for himself and his works, the sober eloquence with which the present Regius Professor set forth his plea for the 'historical teaching of history'. What can I give that is worthy to follow on such a series of addresses? Nothing; I have but to deliver the comments of a practical teacher on what he has seen and what he has read during eighty continuous terms of residence in this University.

But to proceed. What have been the messages of the

history professors whom I personally remember? The chair which I myself have the honour to hold has but a short record. This is, I believe, the first inaugural lecture by a Chichele Professor of Modern History that any member of this University has ever attended. When the professorship was founded in 1862, and my dear old predecessor Montagu Burrows was chosen as its first occupant, the custom of delivering such harangues does not seem to have been yet fully established. At any rate, I can find no trace either in the oral tradition of the College, or in written archives—there was no *University Gazette* till 1870—that he thought it necessary to open his first professorial term in such a fashion. If he did set forth his views on history, and the way in which it should be taught, in any formal address, I make no doubt that it was as sensible and patriotic as was every other speech of his to which I listened, during the twenty-two years that we were members of All Souls College together. He was a man who always strove to do his duty, and we may take it that he laid down for himself in 1862 precisely the course that he actually carried out for the forty-three years of solid and unassuming work that followed his election to the chair. In his early days he was a popular lecturer—in his later time audiences had drifted away and historical teaching had taken to developments that were unfamiliar to him. But to the last his terminal lectures were carefully prepared and duly delivered: he always did his best to bring them up to the level of the last modern discoveries: he frequently composed an entirely new course: for he was not one of those professors who are contented to discharge statutory obligations by the constant repetition of a limited number of familiar exercises, in the

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style of the barrel-organ. Nor did he ever—like some other distinguished professors that I remember—announce series of lectures on out-of-the-way subjects and at inconvenient hours, to which nobody came, and nobody was intended to come. Many of those who were wont to speak over-lightly of him might have learned a lesson from his conscientious discharge of his duties according to his lights, under circumstances which in his later years were enough to dishearten a much younger man. Many forgot his very considerable literary output: he had published more than a dozen books, small and great, of which several—for example his *Life of Lord Hawke*—have remained the standard authorities on the subjects with which they deal unto this day. Oxford might be considered happy if all her professors attained to his standard of duty and his level of performance.

If Montagu Burrows never delivered an inaugural address, the custom which made such lectures permissible, and then practically obligatory, came in not many years after his preferment to the Chichele chair. I have read that which Dr. Stubbs delivered in 1867, and I have heard with my own ears those of his four successors. Burrows, you will note, in his forty-three years of office, saw no less than six Regius professors in occupation of the other historical chair which this University maintains, and all six of them men of mark. Dr. Stubbs's inaugural lecture started with a eulogy on King George I—rather an unpromising subject for panegyric, though that prosaic monarch deserved a moment's praise as the founder of the Regius chair. But the main thesis of his address was the praise of history for its own sake: it is curious to note that in 1867 it would seem to have been necessary to defend the study as a thing on its trial as an

educational training, and still derided as such by some of the academic thinkers of that generation. We are far from the time when Dr. Stubbs had to declare that 'History is not well used: it is taught as a task for children, it is valued only as an instrument to strengthen the memory: it is undervalued in its true character of mental training: it is learned to qualify men to make effective speeches to ignorant hearers, and to indite brilliant articles for people who only read periodicals: it has been begun from the base of ecclesiastical or political partizanship: it is made the embellishment for wordy eloquence, a source of subjects for pictorial talent that evolves grouping, features, and circumstances from its own consciousness, and then goes to its dictionary to look out names and dates for its figures: it is written for readers already known, courted, and pandered to. What wonder if there are few who love it for its own sake, when there are so few who know it as it is!' In 1867 that great man thought it necessary to defend history from the charge of being the mere handmaid of political or ecclesiastical controversy, to declare that it should be studied as an end in itself with no ulterior motives. How he would have been surprised to find that, less than forty years later, the apologetic tone of historians would be so much a thing of the past that a Cambridge Regius professor could declare that history, considered as history, has no more to do with morals than it has to do with literature, and seem almost to deprecate any attempt either to strive to make it readable, or to draw any moral deductions from its study. Stubbs believed, and most of us (I think) still believe to-day, that the science which we love is not merely concerned with the stringing together of facts in their correct order and the reconstitution of annals, but with

something more. We must draw the moral, whether we will or no: conscious that much nonsense has been talked under the name of 'the philosophy of history', that nothing is so cheap and so easy as to knock together ingenious theories from insufficient data, we yet hold that history has its lessons, and that they can be discovered and taught. 'The experience of the past,' as Stubbs wrote, '*can* be carried into the present: study gives us maxims as well as dry facts.' The teacher who contents himself with arraying the facts in due order has only accomplished half his task. He must take the risk and endeavour to deduce the inner meaning of the annals that he has set forth, content to err if err he must. The fear of being detected in a mistaken conclusion, which keeps some men from drawing any conclusions at all, is a craven fear. What matter if we are proved wrong, provided that truth is advanced? All men are liable to error: true greatness of spirit is shown not by the man who assumes the pose of infallibility, but by him who joyfully accepts correction, and turns it to immediate account.

I did not hear Dr. Stubbs's Inaugural Lecture—being then a small schoolboy—but I did hear that of his successor Freeman, and those of the three professors who followed Freeman in the Regius chair. I retain a very clear remembrance of each of them, and have refreshed my recollections by looking up the records of them in contemporary periodicals. Freeman's address in October, 1884, was in the main an impassioned harangue in praise of what he called the 'Unity of History'. His thesis was that it is useless to draw a line at the year 476 A.D., and to call what goes before 'Ancient' and what comes after 'Modern': that every one who desires to study history must range freely

over the whole period from the Call of Abraham or the Dorian Migration to the Russo-Turkish war, which was (when he spoke) the last landmark in European annals. The theme was inspiring; the general truth of the fact that it is absurd to shut up history with water-tight compartments is undeniable. But the application of it to the practical needs of the University was the difficult point. Freeman tried to illustrate it by delivering a series of lectures on the history of Sicily, which was to range from the earliest Greek and Carthaginian settlement of the island past the Punic Wars, the Goths and Vandals and Moors, down to the days of the Norman Roger and Frederic of Hohenstaufen. But the lectures were never completed, because no continuous audience could be found to attend them. Nor can I blame the University for not being able to provide hearers for a great historian lecturing on a great subject. It is a melancholy fact that the days are past in which it was possible for any one—graduate or undergraduate—to aim at being encyclopaedic. The bulk of knowledge to be assimilated, of books to be read, has grown so great that no wise man proposes to himself, even in his wildest dreams, to acquire more than a sound working knowledge of general history. That proper basis of assimilated facts he must possess, or he will risk building his specialized work without a foundation. But the main interest of the student must be confined within some narrower and less ambitious sphere, and to expect him to master over two thousand years of the history of Sicily in anything but the main outlines was hopeless. Freeman did not propose to give a rapid sketch of the annals of the island, but to linger over them lovingly for some four or five terms—now commenting on the text of Thucydides or of Diodorus, anon on that of

Geoffrey Malaterra. But I think that no one followed the whole of the various sections of this vast whole, and I know well how few were those who attended the later course, and listened to the details of the expulsion of the Moor, and the building up of the Norman realm. Unfortunately those who were interested in Timoleon and Agathocles could not be induced to follow the exploits of Maniakes or Roger, and vice versa. To those who were ready to specialize in the one period, the other period was only a small corner of that vast bulk of universal history which cannot be studied in a minute fashion. We all believe, in short, in the unity of history, but we know to our sorrow that it is not possible to master all parts of it with the same thoroughness. Freeman used to ascribe the indifference of the members of the University to his lectures on Gregory of Tours or Geoffrey Malaterra to the Examination system, his pet aversion: he thought that if graduates and undergraduates had not been pinned down to Period IV or Period VI, or the textual knowledge of the Charters of Stubbs, and all our other technicalities of the Schools, they would have been thronging to his lectures on the Frank or the Norman. I fancy that he erred—the real rock in the way was the growing sense of the vastness of history and the necessity for specialization. How many men in a hundred, if each were allowed to choose his own course and read what he pleased, would pitch on the particular epoch that happened to be that which most interested the professor of the day? A small proportion at the best, and therein lies the whole difficulty of reconciling certain views of the professorial office with the practical facts of the study of history by the average man.

Nothing could contrast more curiously with Freeman's

Inaugural of 1884 than Froude's Inaugural of 1892. The one was the sermon of a prophet who had his message to deliver, who was righteously indignant with a generation which, as he thought, refused to make all history its province, and was in bondage to the curriculum of the schools. Froude's lecture, on the other hand, was not couched in such terms of earnest denunciation: it was paradoxical, witty, full of persiflage and half-ironical apologetics. 'How do I come to be here, Regius Professor of the University of Oxford?' he asked, and then answered, with a smile, 'I was tempted—and I fell.' But putting aside his very clever and rather touching personal explanation of his attitude to Oxford and Oxford's attitude to him, the main thesis of Froude's lecture was a defence of the personal and dramatic treatment of history. He fully appreciated all that had been said or written against his methods and his manner, and set himself cheerfully to defend them. I was carried away at the moment by his eloquent plea in favour of the view that history must be written as literature, that it is the historian's duty to present his work in a shape that will be clearly comprehensible to as many readers as possible, that dull, pedantic, over-technical diction is an absolute crime, since by it possible converts to the cause of history may be turned back and estranged. To Froude's other view, that the influence of the personality of the historian cannot possibly be eliminated, that he must state the case as it appears to him, not as it might appear to some other-self destitute of convictions and prejudices, I found myself giving a logical negative, but a practical approval. Logically no doubt one ought to agree with Lord Acton and Dr. Bury, and to conceive of the historian as a passionless creature set only on chroni-

clinging the facts as they occurred. You will remember how Lord Acton put his view in the introductory Epistle to the great 'Cambridge Modern History'—'Contributors must understand,' he wrote, 'that nobody must be able to tell, without examining the list of authors, where the bishop of Oxford laid down the pen, and whether it was Fairbairn or Gasquet, Liebermann or Harrison who took it up. . . . Our account of Waterloo must be one that satisfies French and English, German and Dutchman alike.' I may incidentally remark that the admirable 'Cambridge History' has not actually been written in any such fashion. Even were the authors' names deleted, it would require no great power of textual criticism to find out where Dr. Fairbairn 'took up the pen'. The chapter on Waterloo chanced to fall to my own care: I fear that I cannot conscientiously declare that it would be as satisfactory to the Dutchman as to the Frenchman—though I did my best according to my lights to arrive at the exact truth. In sober fact it is impossible to write history that every man, whatever his race, creed, or politics, can accept—unless indeed we are dealing with ages and problems so remote from our own that the personal element does not appear. Conceivably it may be possible to talk of Khammurabi or Rameses or some statesman of China of the seventh century B.C. without offending any man. It is *not* possible to do so with Pericles or Caesar—much less with Hildebrand or Calvin, Napoleon or Bismarck. The historian whose verdict on any one of those crucial personages is to be equally satisfactory to everybody, must perform a sort of *tour de force* of compromise and hedging, or confine himself to the bald statement of facts accomplished. The moment that he dares to draw a deduction or point

a moral, the personal element inevitably makes itself felt. Imagine an appreciation of Bismarck that equally pleased a patriotic Frenchman and a patriotic German!

Therefore I am practically driven to concede to Froude that history must be subjective. No great book ever has been or ever will be written by a historian who suppressed self as he wrote each word: what such a book may conceivably gain in accuracy it loses in spontaneity and conviction. The passionless scientist chronicling the antics of puppets with whom he feels no sympathy, for whom he has no moral like or dislike, does not tend to produce a readable literary output. I can safely leave the view of those who hold that history has nothing to do with literature—any more than it has anything to do with morals—and the view advocated by Froude to fight out their duel in the public arena, little doubting which will be the winner.

And now for a word on the third of the inaugural lectures of history professors that I have listened to. York Powell was the friend of all of us: most of us also owe him a kindly memory for help given and useful hints received. All remember the high hopes which we entertained when he was appointed to the Regius Chair. His Inaugural was characteristic—a short eulogy of Freeman and Stubbs—a bare mention of Froude—an earnest plea for the starting in England of something like the Paris École des Chartes—and then a pause and a gap and nothing more. The address was a sympathetic and suggestive torso, lasting less than half an hour. York Powell, with all his vast knowledge and his ready, many-sided brain, was always more effective in what he suggested than in what he accomplished. So far as I could follow the thesis that he wished to develop in his address, it was that the study of history

in this country was handicapped by a want of machinery for the facilitation of research—places where the student can be taught the elements of palaeography and diplomatics, where he can have his run among manuscripts and learn their tricks and habits under skilled supervision, where he can lay his hand readily on scientific bibliographies. Unlike most of the suggestions made in inaugural lectures, this plea had some effect—but only in London. In Oxford, where it might have been expected to have led to some definite and immediate effort, nothing was done: the Common Fund prefers to endow readerships for subjects in which it is perfectly certain that no large class of learners can ever be got together—such as Egyptology—and leaves us with our admirable teachers in palaeography and diplomatics stinted to a miserable £50 or £80 and lecturing for only a few weeks in the year.

The thesis of York Powell's inaugural lecture leads us on directly to that of the present occupant of the Regius chair—my good friend Professor Firth—which most of those present to-day heard delivered some eighteen months ago. The two addresses are linked together by the fact that both of them are pleas for the researcher—York Powell wished to have him equipped with the necessary machinery for starting on his work, Professor Firth wants to have him 'taught history historically', to use the phrase that stands at the head of the printed form of his lecture. Every one must agree with such an aspiration—the very idea of a historian taught unhistorically seems to carry its own refutation on its face. Clearly we all are and must be at one on this point—if we understand the same thing by the same phrase. But I fancy that the exact shade of meaning in Professor Firth's mind when he uses these

words is what he expands (in another page) into 'a training in the methods of investigation, in the use of original authorities, and in those auxiliary sciences which the Germans call *Hilfswissenschaften*'. When we have narrowed down the meaning of the 'historical teaching of history' to this sense, I feel inclined to observe that to a certain extent we are so teaching history already, and that where we clearly are not, there is much to be said for the less ambitious programme that is at present followed. In short we agree on many things, but differ on the problem how far the Modern History School should be technical, how far general and merely educational in its scope. At the bottom any divergence that there may be between us comes from a slightly varied point of view on that old problem of the 'liberal education', what it is, and what it is not, which has already been (perhaps) debated too much in academic circles. It may be that I am prejudiced from having taken the old *Literae Humaniores* School before I turned my hand to history. I fear that I am still more prejudiced by having been engaged for more than twenty years in conducting all sorts and conditions of men up to, and through, the portals of the Examination Schools. Five years spent as a deputy professor have not eradicated the old tutorial virus from my system. It is from the standing-point of the college teacher, released at last from his dumbness and permitted for the first time to speak *ex cathedra*, that I state my conclusion.

It is many years since an inaugural lecture was delivered to this University by a history professor who came to his post straight from bearing the burden and heat of the day as an ordinary college tutor. Dr. Stubbs reached the Regius Professorship from the leisure of a country vicarage; Freeman and Froude had spent the

best part of their lives in the happy condition of the literary historian who works untrammelled by terms that have to be kept, essays that have to be heard, and lectures that have to be delivered in formal and regular sequence. Our last Regius professor but one, as all who knew him and loved him will confess, was not an ordinary college tutor though he held a tutorial post. Our present Regius professor, to whose inaugural lecture we listened with such interest only last year, shared with Freeman and Froude the privilege of working when and how he pleased, save for the short time during which he took the history work of a college where history men were few and far between. All of the five whom I have named, in short, represented the class of the researcher rather than that of the professional University teacher. Some of them almost gloried in the fact that they knew nothing of, and cared little for, the way in which the average man here was receiving his education. I heard with my own ears Professor Freeman make the astounding statement that 'in the art of preparing—I will not use the ugly word *cramming*—an undergraduate for his class, the last bachelor who has just won his own class is necessarily more skilful than I'. At that moment (1884) I was myself that 'last bachelor', and as such could best fathom the strange misconception of our system which such a statement presupposed. Froude's Inaugural, though it spoke of Oxford history in vaguely laudatory terms, implied an almost equally complete misunderstanding of what the work of the History School really was. He advocated, as a happy suggestion, the use of plenty of early constitutional documents as a base for the study of English History—in apparent ignorance of the fact that *Stubbs's Charters* was already a sort of

Bible for the undergraduate, and that a textual knowledge of it was the one thing on which some of our local teachers were laying what I privately considered almost too great a stress. A little while after giving his Inaugural he wrote to a friend, 'The teaching business at Oxford, which goes on at high pressure, is in itself utterly absurd.' Professor Firth has taught and examined for the School himself, so knows a great deal more about it than Froude or Freeman, but I think he is rather hard upon it when he says that 'he must complain that it does extremely little for the exceptional man who wishes to study history for its own sake'. I was myself one of those unfortunate exceptionals, and know perfectly well that it did a good deal for me—though I had only a scant ten months to read for it.

So, begging for the indulgence of an audience which has perhaps come to hear of higher matters, I must state my humble conviction that our present system, as it works out in the teaching of the average college tutor and the examinations by the University which follow, has done admirably in the past and is still vigorous and successful. I do not maintain that the curriculum could not be improved. I do not pretend to say that there have not been in my memory insufficiently equipped tutors, and dull tutors, and (what is more frequent) tutors of high gifts, who were yet utterly unable to inspire or interest even the most conscientious pupil. The worst teacher without exception that I ever knew was a man who had obtained the highest possible University distinctions, and had also done meritorious work in research. He did not teach in Oxford, so no one need try to identify him. But I am thinking of the system as worked by its best exponents, not its less satisfactory ones. And, so

thinking I am indignant at all the cheap satire levelled against the college tutorial system, the curriculum of the Schools, the examinations and their results, which forms the staple of the irresponsible criticisms of the daily, weekly, or monthly press, of the pamphlets of the man with a grievance, and of the harangues delivered when educationalists (horrid word!) assemble in conclave.

The first problem that must be faced is that this University is a place of Education as well as a place of Research. It is sometimes difficult to correlate its two functions: it often seems difficult to determine how far they can or ought to be discharged by the same body of workers. But, whatever may be our views on this point, there remains the obvious fact that we are confronted by a large body of young men who have to be educated, and that the larger proportion of them are intended for careers for which no technical Schools-curriculum exists. For this let us be thankful; I shudder to think that there are fanatics who would be prepared to draw up the regulations for a special education for any line of life—journalism, the Stock Exchange, politics, Charity Organization, or the life of the country gentleman. But this madness is still far off—practically our problem is to deal with some 150 or 200 undergraduates destined for the most various occupations in after-life, who unite in thinking that the Modern History School suits them better than any other of the avenues to a degree which the University at present offers. Of this body a very small proportion are destined in the end to take up the burden of original research. I agree with Professor Firth—so doubtless does every one here present—in regretting that the percentage *is* so small; but it can never be much larger—unless indeed some strange

power should ever succeed in turning our old Modern History Course into a technical school for historians—technical in the sense that the education here in Medicine or Forestry is technical. I should myself—as I have said before—deplore any such transformation, holding as I do that the School is discharging a more generally useful function as it stands at present, than it would if it were equipped with a severely specialistic curriculum, intended only for those who were destined for the career of researchers in or teachers of history. Clearly a School reconstructed on such lines would cease to attract some four-fifths of those who at present enter for it. It would be a wholly different affair.

Now there are some few of these young gentlemen whom we have at present to teach, whom I should be quite contented to evict; they read Modern History not because they have any vocation for its study, or any special interest in it, but simply and solely because their college compels them to offer *some* Honour School, and they hope to find this one rather less rebarbative than Law or Mathematics, Theology or Physical Science. These men, Passmen *φύσει*, Honour-men by external compulsion, are a nuisance to their tutors; it is heart-breaking to harangue them for forty minutes as they loll listless, after delivering their perfunctory weekly essay. They are a nuisance to the examiner, who sits doubting wearily whether he shall give them a 'group' or two, or simply relegate them to the limbo of *non satis*. They are ultimately a nuisance to the college which has unwisely forced them to take honours, since they are thrown back upon it in October, to take some sort of a pass—to the complete upsetting of tutorial arrangements.

But setting aside the 30 or 40 men a year who ought

not to have appeared in the Modern History School at all, we have a remainder of from 140 to 160 undergraduates, of whom only some ten or a dozen have any intention either of taking up historical teaching or of engaging in original research. The remainder are destined to the most various careers: some will become members of Parliament or diplomatists, many will be civil servants, some will take Holy Orders, others will be journalists, literary men, business men, barristers, schoolmasters, and what not. To all such a sound general knowledge of history—with the elements of economic history, political science, political geography, constitutional history—will be invaluable. Palaeography, the so-called ‘study of methods of investigation’, and all the *Hilfswissenschaften* will be of comparatively little use. And—for here comes the difficulty—if the technical subjects are introduced, it can only be at the cost of teaching less of the general subjects. For the student’s time during the two years that he has to devote to the Modern History School is quite sufficiently occupied by the present curriculum. New matter can only be introduced by evicting some of the old matter, or teaching it in a less thorough and solid fashion. Is there any section of the present prescribed work which we should like to cut down to any appreciable extent? I mean to cut down to such an extent that the time saved on it would be sufficient to allow of the introduction of several new elements—such as palaeography—into the curriculum. Personally I might be desirous of paying a little less attention to early constitutional antiquities than is done at present. But I must confess that if I was permitted to economize on that point, it would only be with the desire of increasing the quantity of foreign history required. The present

periods seem to me too short, and the men should be compelled to read them not in English manuals but in the great foreign historians. To my poor apprehension the real blot on the School is not the one that has been alleged, but the want of any provision that the student shall have some grip of several foreign languages. At present Latin is the only tongue with which he is compelled to show some acquaintance. Scores of men every year escape any touch with French, German, or Italian by offering those two special subjects—India and the Great Rebellion—where all the prescribed books are in English. And even of Latin the amount required is so small that a man may obtain a first class without being able to translate a simple Classical author with reasonable accuracy. I speak of this from personal experience. Nothing, therefore, can be more cheering than the news that the Hebdomadal Council is just about to bring forward a statute enabling us to make a knowledge of modern languages compulsory on all our candidates.

But I must not wander from the point which I am now engaged in urging. It seems to me that we must frankly recognize that the Modern History curriculum must be drawn up rather with an eye to the vast majority of men who seek in it a general liberal education, than to the small minority to whom a technical training in historiography might conceivably be more profitable. And further, I think that even for this minority the present School is an excellent base for their later studies, and a base with which they cannot dispense. For of all things the most necessary for the researcher is a very broad knowledge of the general trend of history far outside the limits of his special period. Unless he has this, he risks making the

wildest and most absurd errors the moment that he tries to draw a comparison between epoch and epoch, or to illustrate his thesis by parallels from another age or another country. The scientifically trained continental historian is as liable to this as the most self-taught English local antiquary. May I give an illustration? Seignebos's *Europe Contemporaine* is an oft-quoted authority, yet drawing a moral from English Politics and mentioning the Adullamites of 1866, he (for want of a little Scripture history) solemnly adds, 'Adullamites, allusion Biblique, assassins—parce qu'Adullam a voulu tuer David.' And did not the almost infallible Mommsen, trespassing, for once in a way, into ground where he was insufficiently informed, note in one of his chapters on the Roman Empire that the Welsh tongue is to-day spoken in Cumberland and Westmoreland?

If such men can write such strange errors, what are we to expect from the Oxford researcher, if we let him off any appreciable portion of his study of the general foundations of history, in order that he may substitute technical and specialistic knowledge of the epoch in which he is interested? I would have no man permitted to undertake any original work until he has acquired a very broad as well as a very sound knowledge of the general outlines of history, and this is what I maintain that our present Modern History School—with all its defects—does on the whole give us. But—say some—granted that the School may put those who study it honestly in possession of a vast mass of facts, it yet does not furnish them with *method*, with the art of turning all those facts to logical account. Here I venture to differ: there are parts of the curriculum which seem to me to be precisely calculated

to have the desired effect on all the better minds that are brought into contact with them. If a man cannot pick up the art of weighing and comparing facts and theories from studying his Aristotle and his Maine, his Hobbes, his Maitland and his Stubbs, he will not pick it up from any lectures on method. If he can read all the prescribed books for his special subject without learning how to compare sources and evaluate their worth; if he can peruse Clarendon and Ludlow, Baillie and Cromwell's Speeches; or again, if he can read James Mill with the dispatches of Warren Hastings and Wellesley, or Boha-ed-din alongside of the *Itinerarium Ricardi*, without learning automatically the elements of historical criticism—then he is not a person about whom we need bother our heads at all. He will never make a historian, though you drive 'method' into him with a hammer.

In short, the true historian—and here lies the gist of my creed—is born and not made. If he has the root of the matter in him, he gets precisely such a preliminary education from his schools as will enable him to work for himself when his schools are over. Of course if his tastes are mediaeval he will have to learn palaeography afterwards; but this is a small matter. Do we not possess an admirable teacher in that subject, though we pay him too little, and do not even enable him to lecture all the year round? But as to the rest, it seems to me that the one counsel that can be given to the man who has achieved his first class for the Schools and then wishes to set sail into the ocean of Research, is simply to work—and work—and work again. He will think many hours wasted—they are not really so: a negative result is often as valuable as (though less exciting than) a positive one. In the

search, too, for what you do not find, you will often come upon material which will be invaluable to you in some later exploration ten years hence. Every queer corner explored, every abandoned shaft sunk into some unfruitful stratum, has really been part of our training. It is only what we have found for ourselves that really lives for us: second-hand knowledge is useful for the general enquirer, for the 'man in the Schools'—it can be taught and well taught. First-hand knowledge is unteachable—it must be learnt for oneself—not from the lecture of the man who has 'been there before'. I hate to hear the historical beginner whining that he cannot go out into the world of history and find everything already ticketed and docketed and done up into neat parcels, ready for his immediate use. His moan is merely like that of the stupid undergraduate who comes back to you to complain that he can find nowhere in print the comparison between the strategy of Napoleon Bonaparte and of Frederic the Great which you have set him for an essay. If history could be automatically constructed, by putting before the student perfect bibliographies, from which he could find every possible fact that he could require, it would be (to my mind) a dreary business. Fortunately this danger is solving itself—bibliographies on some subjects have grown so enormous that they have become a hindrance rather than a help: what good is it to have 700 titles of monographs, of all varieties of intrinsic value and accessibility, flung in your face?

In short, it seems to me that zeal, insatiable curiosity, a ready mind to shape hypotheses, a sound judgement to test them, above all a dogged determination to work at all times and in all places, are the real requisites of the historian rather than any array of technical training.

The very best of our own English work has always been done in that fashion, and I think that it will continue so to be done. The sanity and energy and ingenuity of the researcher is the main thing that matters. If he is worth his salt, he will teach himself 'method' in a very short time. Nothing astonishes me more than the way in which the real born historian learns to get to the heart of a matter within a year or so of starting work—and as to the man who is not born to the trade, it is mistaken kindness to encourage him to turn to a career for which he is not mentally equipped.

But it being granted that we have obtained the right man, with the requisite energy, zeal, and preliminary education, there are still two notes of caution which have to be struck if we are to get really fruitful work out of him. The one is obvious, the other much less so. The first is that the would-be historian must avoid vague sporadic and ill-defined aims, which enable him to wander over vast and miscellaneous fields of research, absorbing masses of material of such heterogeneous kinds that they never get digested, and never arrive at the dignity of print. If any work is ever really wasted in the world, it is that of the man who makes himself a sort of walking encyclopaedia, and then dies without having produced a single book. His knowledge perishes with him, and the facts which he has collected have to be reconquered by some successor, because he has never deigned to commit them to paper. Every one of us has known such men—but perhaps I may be permitted to speak for a moment of the king of them all. I name him with infinite respect: he was in some ways a great man, and he might have been a great historian. He started to read history early, he was

granted a long life, he had ample leisure, he was able to collect such a library of its kind as England had never before seen. And he died leaving as his life's achievement a lecture or two, and a number of reviews and short papers scattered about in the back numbers of more or less unobtainable periodicals, together with a scheme for a modern history which (though excellent in itself) has certainly not been carried out on the lines which he laid down. This heart-breaking paucity of results from a man qualified to do great things seems to me to have proceeded mainly from the cardinal defect of the want of a definite clear-cut thesis. Lord Acton had a great book hovering before his mind: what it was I have never made out: his literary executor, Mr. John Morley, once told me that he fancied that its subject was the Growth of the Modern Idea of Liberty: but two or three alternative and equally vast titles have been suggested. Whatever it was, its compilation necessitated the accumulation of such a mass of detailed material that no single human brain could possibly deal with it. I went down into Shropshire to look at that famous library before it was removed to Cambridge: never was there such a pathetic sight of wasted labour. The owner had read it all: there were shelves on shelves on every conceivable subject—Renaissance sorcery—the Fueros of Aragon—Scholastic Philosophy—the growth of the French Navy—American exploration—Church Councils—and many books were full of hundreds of cross-references in pencil, noting passages as bearing on some particular development or evolution in modern life or thought. There were pigeon-holed cabinets with literally thousands of compartments, into each of which were sorted scores of little white papers with references to some particular topic, so drawn up (as far as I could

judge) that no one but the compiler could easily make out the drift of the section. Arranged in the middle of the long two-storied room was a sort of altar or column composed entirely of unopened parcels of new books from continental publishers. They were apparently coming in at the rate of ten or fifteen books a week, and the owner had evidently tried to keep pace with the accumulation—to digest and annotate them all, and work them into his vast thesis—whatever it was. For years apparently he must have been engaged on this Sisyphean task. Over all these were brown holland sheets, a thick coating of dust, the motes dancing in the pale September sun, a faint aroma of mustiness proceeding from thousands of seventeenth and eighteenth century leather bindings in a room that had been locked up since its owner's death. I never saw any sight which so much impressed on me the vanity of human life. A quarter of the work that had been spent on making those annotations and filling those pigeon-holes would have produced twenty volumes of good history—perhaps an epoch-making book that might have lived for centuries. But all the labour had been wasted—save so far as the actual accumulation of the dead books was a permanent gain to Cambridge—because the accumulator had too vague and too broad an aim. It is better to have produced one solid monograph on the minutest point—better to have edited a single pipe-roll or annotated a single short chronicle—than to have accumulated for forty years unwritten learning that goes down to the grave and is lost. And I said to myself—Learn to be definite at all costs; be limited, if it is necessary, stick to a single century if it must be so, or to a single reign, but write something—knowledge not committed to paper is knowledge lost.

This moral may seem to some of you to be a mere 'occasional glimpse of the obvious', such as may occur to the meanest mind. Not so, I think, the second caution that I would give to all who intend to make history the mistress of their life. It is this, that 'the best', the ideal, the vision of the epoch-making and infallible *magnum opus* which hovers before the mind of many a would-be writer, is the enemy of 'the good', of the useful and worthy, but comparatively unambitious, book that he is really competent to write. Do not be led away by megalomania : do not think that you can possibly write a book without mistakes : the man who imagines that he can do so will probably never write a book at all. The great Turenne once remarked that 'the general who has made no errors in strategy must have commanded in uncommonly few campaigns', and hinted that he did not believe that general to exist. It is the same with the writer of history : he must make up his mind that, however hard he may strive for absolute accuracy, it is certain that there will be errors of detail somewhere—perhaps errors of more than detail. But he should not for that reason shrink back from production ; I have known books hung up for years because the author had not the heart to confess himself fallible. Nothing is a more subtle and deadly enemy of the writing of a good book than a great reputation already won without any literary output. The man who has achieved such a reputation dreads committing himself to print, from an exaggerated fear of being detected in error : such a feeling often grows into actual monomania, and one who could have done good work dies bookless, because he hated the idea of seeing his limitations revealed to the world by some captious critic.

This is not the spirit in which the true historian must

approach his life's work; he must realize that the competent labourer who refuses his co-operation in the great task of reaping the harvest of the past—the harvest that is so great while the labourers are still so few—is sinning against the light. We stand at present in a crisis when the raw material has accumulated in such masses that there is a most pressing want of hands to sort and arrange it. To stand by idle, because you feel that some of your work may prove of no more than temporary worth, because your *amour propre* revolts against the notion that you may be building a scaffolding rather than a permanent structure, is deplorable. By setting forth a hypothesis that may turn out to be only half true, by formulating a thesis that requires indefinite modification, we may serve the cause of history far better than by refusing to put anything on paper that is not absolutely certain, complete, and undeniable. It is only the shallowest fool among critics who contemns the pioneer in any line of research for not having achieved absolute accuracy. Columbus when discovering America wrongly believed that he had reached the Indies: is his service to geography to be ignored or derided because his discovery was made while pursuing a hypothesis that was partly false? The world greatly needs Columbuses; it has no such pressing need for the critic, incapable of forming a bold hypothesis himself, who exists only to point out *ex post facto* small errors in the work of those who have gone before him. Yet I would be far from denying that the critic has his uses too; it is certainly far better to have set right even a dozen minute mistakes in other men's books than to have remained altogether dumb. If one cannot be the pioneer, one can at least do unostentatious work as the navvy who makes smooth the path which the pioneer has discovered.

It matters little what the particular line may be that we take up, so long as we take up some line. There are many before me to-day, admirably competent to set to work to build up some particular corner in the vast gap of unwritten history that shames us all. Work while you may, and where you may. Why have we no real history of mediaeval Scotland—why is there in English no standard general history of Holland, of Hungary, of Norway, of Portugal, even of modern Germany? Why are there still important English Chronicles that have not been reprinted since the early eighteenth century, and others that have not been printed at all? Is it not maddening to think of the vast unsorted bulk of local records and documents? There is work for the man who can summarize and digest existing material, no less than for the man who is intent on making fresh discoveries. Indeed the former is perhaps the more needed of the two at the present moment. Many may urge want of leisure—but surely if there is not leisure for a great there is leisure for a small piece of work. If we cannot write a large book we may write a little one: if even a little book is too much to ask, is there not some small piece of editing or commentary that would have its worth? It may be an unremunerative piece of work, it may be an obscure piece of work, it may even be an uninteresting piece of work, that is incumbent on the individual; but surely every trained specialist owes 'his stone to the cairn'. We have the largest, and as we boast, the best school of history in the realm: must we not each do our best to make it as productive as it is popular, and as solid in its practical results as it is philosophic in its structure?

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